# WRITE TO LIFE

A collection of poems
from survivors

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### Foreword

**Write to Life** is the longest running refugee writers' group in the UK, and the only one specifically for survivors of torture. In the twelve years it has been running, not only has **Write to Life** proved to be a therapeutic exercise for members, but it has also had enormous impact in raising awareness and building strong community links.

In addition to the group work we carry out, each member also benefits from one-to-one sessions with a volunteer mentor – all of whom are professional writers – which enable them to explore their personal experiences in much more depth. These extraordinary individuals are working hard to overcome their trauma by revisiting the most painful experiences of their lives, and setting them down on paper.

Indeed, many clients join the group because they want to record these experiences, things they can't forget or need to express. They want to bring these past events into the light, and not leave them running around in their heads in the darkest hour of the night.

I usually try and explain it as a bit like living in a haunted house: you'll never get rid of the ghosts, which are in the fabric of the house itself, but the only power they have over you is the power you allow them. They're not real, they belong in the past; and if you take control of them, make them into your story, you take back that power.

The poems and narrative you will read on the pages ahead are incredibly powerful, but they are much more than that. They form a moving insight into the beauty and resilience of the human spirit and bear witness to the trust and the strong bonds between us, the readers, and the survivors we work with here at Freedom from Torture.

**Sheila Hayman, Coordinator, 'Write to Life'**

## *Hey Passenger!*

Hey, passenger!
Show me your hands.
Where have you come from?
You smell dirty?
You look guilty.
Show me your hands.
Give me your ID.
Not back, not further, just stop here.

*Let me draw breath.*
*Don't shout at me.*
*I am just a passenger.*
*No departure, no destination,*
*Not even gloves to cover my hands.*
*I have left my hands somewhere, I don't know the name.*
*They are in a land with a strange language, but familiar people.*
*They should sow my hands in the field there,*
*To harvest freedom.*
*I am from homelessness,*
*from terror, from chains,*
*from a life sentence for demanding a life.*
*I am guilty*
*of rising up*
*and breathing freely.*
*I am guilty*
*I am exiled from a piece of the world where you are not allowed to sing,*
*Even with the music of the wind.*
*I am the gagged voice of freedom.*

I know you. I know you. I know your type.
You will be a nuisance,
so better to detain…

*There is nowhere for me to rest.*
*It doesn't matter where I am.*
*I need to fight again.*

**FARYAD**

People like Faryad who are fleeing torture, often find further torment here. While in their homeland torture is used as a tool of repression and intimidation to crush the human spirit; here they find their life stories disbelieved, their characters doubted and once again their security in question. It is hard for us to imagine what it must feel like but with your support, **Freedom from Torture** can begin to help.

# Our Alley

Our childhood home was at the end of a long, narrow alley;
there was hardly enough room for a car to pass in front of the house.

When my young brother came back late from college,
my mother and I used to wait for him outside the door impatiently.
It was very strange because my mother always recognised
his footsteps from far away…

There's a strange cold silence cast on the path to our house
The alley and I are aflutter,
Hoping to hear your sweet footsteps on the stone pavement,
See your tall shadow embrace the walls of the house at night
In the silver moonlight, the garden's flowers are still awake
So they can intoxicate you with their perfume
The darkened windows cry your blessed name
The door's wooden handle waits sadly for the warmth of your hands
And I wonder who hereafter is going to pick up the red apples
from the trees in our small garden
I feel your memory wrapped into a lump in my throat
Sorrow twists around me like ivy
You're locked in a heavy permanent silence
And I have to be content with your pictures in the album
I want to be insane;
A vagrant, a gypsy blowing with the errant wind, going to the ends
of the world to sing your song with my flute
At midnight I'd become a dragonfly and whisper your story
in the ears of half asleep children,
I'd plant your name like a seed, thousands and thousands of times,
watering it with my tears
And once again fill our alley with you.

**F MEHRBAN**

F Mehrban is a former political prisoner of Iran. She is now a UK citizen and lives in London. Her poetry and short stories have been published in Iran and the UK and some of her poetry can be found on YouTube.

# I am not a normal person

I am sharp sharp but tiny with a narrow hole…

There is no choice
I have to turn and turn my visitor
just to keep it in shape
to sharpen and prepare my slim client
to suit a kid's hand

She is turning her pencil, looking up at the simple round shape
of the lampshade.
It makes her think of the earth; she wants to shape the earth.
She wants to make a space for those who are not welcome.
She wants to make them welcome…
To welcome them.

I am not a normal person. I am just a sharpener.
I am making the pencil a better shape.
She wants to make the earth a better place.

**FARYAD**

# Letter to my mum and dad

Dear mum and dad,
Another year that you have not seen me.

I know as you both read this letter that it may break your heart to know that I am still here, fighting every day, fighting to survive.

You may know everything that you tried to give me but you never knew if I had received it.

Yes, now I understand what you have given me and what you wanted me to receive.

Despite the punishments and those things that made me cry, you gave them to me with a loving heart and because you loved me.

It was wisdom you were trying to give me, but I was too young and blind to see it all. But now, I want you to know, it has shaped me and helped turn me into a wise young woman and a better person.

And I'm sorry if I was a bad daughter. Opportunity is a gift and one of the greatest gifts is life.

I never got to say goodbye. Now I'm writing to say I love you and thank you. Things come and go but you will never leave my heart.

**UWASE N. RYAYO**

I was born in Rwanda, born like other children but I was never raised like other children. Thank you to **Freedom from Torture**. You have helped me come to terms with my past, to see things in a positive way.

**Freedom from Torture**
Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture

Your support has meant that we can offer people like Faryad the life changing support and advice that they need, a range of people-centred services that define **Freedom from Torture**. Thank you so much for having the heart and generosity to care for these survivors – without you, we would be lost.

**We very much hope that you will feel able to respond to Faryad's letter and send a gift today. As a thank you, we would like to send you a previously unpublished piece from our *Write to Life* group to add to this collection. We hope to hear from you very soon.**

**Thank you.**

www.freedomfromtorture.org/survivor-voices